

Advice for future auxiliares de conversación

The orientation meeting at the beginning of the course is all in Spanish!

Just a word of warning, because in my first year I expected the orientation to be in English! If you don't understand anything (as I didn't), don't worry, because there will be a lot of second- and third-years there who can help explain things to you. This leads to my second point...

Learn Spanish

If you don't already speak Spanish, do a course. My Spanish was extremely basic when I came to Málaga at the end of 2012, and it was frustrating not being able to communicate (especially at the comisaría and the extranjería!) There are many different schools and courses in Málaga, but I recommend LinguaSpain. It's right in the centre and the teachers were great. I was immersed in Spanish from the first class, and it's a good way to meet new people.

Go to a lot of language exchanges

In Málaga there are language exchanges almost every night of the week. It's another great way to meet new people and improve your Spanish.

Join the Auxiliares de Conversación Facebook group for your region

People post about a lot of useful things on these groups, for example about accommodation, private tutoring classes and social activities as well. For people thinking about staying in Spain long term, there is another group called Spain Immigration and Residency Questions – SpainGuru.es, which has a lot of advice about residency, de facto relationships, validating university degrees, and other legal things.

Introduce yourself and share information about your country

Make a Powerpoint presentation or something similar about you and your country for your first day so that the kids can get to know you. Most kids will have no idea about the country you come from, so it's a good idea to bring things from home that you can show them. For example some coins from your country, a map, a Powerpoint presentation with photos of the typical animals, landmarks or monuments, food, you can listen to the national anthem etc. Holidays are a good opportunity to share something about your country and your culture, such as Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter etc. Spain has a lot of its own particular holidays, but they love any excuse to celebrate and have incorporated a lot of "non-traditional" holidays into the school calendar.

Useful websites and resources

For younger kids, some of the best websites I use to find resources/activities/videos are Super Simple Learning, Activity Village, Learn English Kids from the British Council and Dr Binocs and Super Simple Songs on Youtube. Learn English Teens is also good to get ideas and activities for classes with older kids in the high school, and Teaching English from the British Council has complete lesson plans which you can adapt. Busy Teacher is another good website with a lot of different resources.

Know something about English grammar

You may find that in some English classes, and above all in private tutoring classes, your students will have very specific questions about grammar. On more than one occasion I found myself thinking: “I really should have done a TEFL course.” If you don’t already know a bit about English grammar, it’s a good idea to do some reading, either in textbooks or online. It will make you look a lot more credible in the classroom!

Tips for primary school assistants

The younger students love to play games, and there are a lot of games you can play with flashcards. These are particularly good for kids who are shy or don’t have the language skills yet, because they can participate non-verbally. In general, the younger kids love singing songs and dancing, so don’t be shy about standing at the front of the class and making a fool of yourself! To introduce or practice vocabulary, you can repeat the same word in silly voices, for example like a mouse, a giant, a robot, etc.

Tips for high school assistants

In the high school, some kids love English and others hate it, and the level of English can vary widely. When I plan the classes, I try to choose topics that I think will be interesting for them, for example a class about graffiti, tattoos and piercings, Valentine’s Day, the history of Easter etc. They like to do role-play speaking activities, but they have to be well organised. In general, try to get everyone to participate, not just the good students who volunteer all the time.

Field trips and excursions

My advice is to say yes to any invitations to excursions! I’ve been very fortunate to participate in different activities from both schools. With the primary school, I accompanied the Year 3’s to swimming lessons, helped to supervise the Easter egg hunt at the local park, went to the sports day at Carranque, and a beach games day in El Palo, to name a few. With the high school I’ve been to the science centre and the Alhambra in Granada, a theatre production at Teatro Echegaray, the Heritage Museum and British Cemetery in Málaga, and I even went with the Year 10’s on their school trip to Rome. These are the experiences you will take away with you, so say yes to everything.

General advice

Know what you're obliged to do and what you're not. You should always be accompanied by the real teacher, and you should only be working at the school(s) for a total of 12 hours a week. You shouldn't have to discipline the students or try to control the classroom by yourself. Your main job is to help the students with their pronunciation, so you should always speak to them in English. If they know that you can speak Spanish, they won't make an effort to communicate with you in English. Try to be enthusiastic and participate; the teachers will really appreciate it if you take the initiative and offer to prepare something.

Ask for help when you need it

It's normal that living abroad is going to be overwhelming at times, especially if it's your first year. Things like opening a bank account or organising your ID card in another language can seem impossibly difficult. Your bilingual coordinator is there to help you, so don't be too proud or too shy to ask for something.

Have fun

This program is a great opportunity to broaden your horizons, learn a new language and meet new people who may very well become lifelong friends. I can safely say that doing the auxiliares program was one of the best things I've ever done. Don't take on too many private tutoring classes, take advantage of the long weekends and go travelling, and get to know the locals because they are some of the nicest people you will ever meet.

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